That Weird, Arrhythmic Thing

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That summer, the country was a tinderbox. Once the first match was lit, there was no turning back; it was like a spell had been cast, and the people were in thrall. Bridget knows this because the stories have been passed down. She knows that on August 9th, 1922, Mossy Sullivan, her great- grand-uncle, set out with the boys from the Second Battalion to burn Drumclerrig Manor. She knows the turn, just past Sean the Keeper's cottage, where they shimmied the estate walls, cutting through oak forest to stand on an outcrop of rock overlooking the house. And this is where the waters muddy. Whilst some claim it was a trick of the light, what was revealed in the moon's silver beam has been elaborated and embellished in many a retelling since.

With its stone chimneys visible from his bedroom window, the manor had been an abiding presence in Mossy's life for as long as he could remember. His mother, god rest her, had worked there as a maid. Aunt Hannah, who later joined the Poor Clares, had taken the position when she left. It was Hannah who put in the word for his sister, Norah Kate, the youngest of the Sullivan girls. Though Norah had been grateful for the recommendation, there was a wariness about her when she returned home that first week. Naturally, Mossy was concerned, and when she confided, cheeks burning, that Lord Neville had a roving eye, he nearly lost the rag.

Poor Norah was driven simple by the questions put to her as they strolled the road. There was no detail, too small or insignificant for his consideration. And it was from this persistent probing that Mossy learned Lord Neville liked to eat kippers for breakfast; that the portraits hanging over his head were of his forebears, and that stashed beneath the great mahogany table, there was a load-

ed pistol. What's more, despite all the warnings he'd been issued, the old goat was defiant, refusing to pack his bags and leave as so many of his compatriots had. That was why Mossy signed up with Danny McCarthy and the three Hanley brothers for the operation on the ninth.

When she closes her eyes, Bridget can hear the snap of branches, feel the weight of the petrol can. She has a vivid imagination. An essay she wrote about Mossy took a prize in the annual newspaper competition. Pen racing across the page, she'd described how the lads had been dousing their rags as the moon rose above the manor, spotlighting the carved stone dragon crouched on its roof. In her rendition, she had them falling to their knees, mouths agape. And that was when things fell apart- convinced his brother, a Capuchin Friar who'd died that past Autumn, was sending him a solemn warning, Danny McCarthy called off the operation. Sure, what could Mossy do? He was only the lookout.

A hundred years later, the same stone dragon looks down at Bridget as she clears tables in the manor's courtyard. Recalling the story about Mossy brings a smile to her face. She has a good feeling about this new job. Even though several of her school friends had applied, she was full sure she was going to get it. What did her granny use to say? 'What's for us, will not pass us.' Contemplating the simple wisdom of her words, she puts down the tea-tray and gazes across the lawn. As luck would have it, a straggle of young people spills out onto the terrace. She watches a gangly lad in cut-off denims wrestling a harness on a wolfhound pup. Ambrose Neville, heir incumbent to the two thousand-acre estate, and a dog lover like herself. Her thoughts drift to their first meeting, three days ago, when he'd ambled into the tea room looking for flour. His Uncle Ned had handed him the bag of Doves organic.

'This is Bridget,' he'd said, gesturing in her direction. 'She's a whizz with the Gaggia.' Their eyes met, Ambrose uttered some-

thing about his coffee addiction, and a stream of bubbles fizzed and popped in her brain.

Snapping her back to the present, the man at table two waves his biro.

'Slice of tart and a latte there when you're ready.'

'Sure thing,' she says, retrieving the loaded tray and scuttling back to the kitchen. Inside its steamy interior, Ned is lashing dressing onto a green leaf salad.

'Where's Charlotte?' she says, making a thing of checking the clock. He shrugs like it's got nothing to do with him. Deliberately, she lets the plates clatter under the tap. If Ned weren't her boss, she'd have said something. Just because Charlotte's a family friend doesn't mean she can show up when she feels like it.

Twenty minutes later, elbow deep in suds, Bridget remembers the coffee for table two. As she's steaming the milk, her thoughts flit to Ambrose. Should she slip him her number or play it cool? There is an abstract quality to her deliberation. In this free-floating space she now occupies, she feels the inevitability of their encounter, a sense that this was meant to be. She searches for the word to describe this cosmic certainty and gives up. Since working in the tea room, she's learned there are gaps in her vocabulary. She'd observed Ned's mystification when she'd mentioned the greenhouse around the back. 'Ah,' he'd said, rubbing his chin, 'You mean the Orangery.'

Glancing across at its weathered ironwork, she sees a wiry crossbreed hurtle past recycling. The flash of brindle makes her stomach plummet. Bolting out the door, she hears a scream from a solid-looking toddler. She watches, helpless, as the creature gulps a crust of bread, then victory loops the courtyard. When, inevitably, it bounds in her direction, she feels the swivel of eyes like pinpricks.

'What the hell, Bridget. Do you know this dog?'

Ned's breath is hot on her neck. It flashes into her head to say no, but instead she grabs its tartan collar and says in a high, tight voice, ' Yes, she's my dog. Oh my god! I'm so sorry. Sit down, girl, SIT DOWN.'

Ned strides off to retrieve the yard broom, picking up upended chairs and issuing apologies as he goes. The toddler continues to thrash and wail in its mother's arms. As Bridget stoops to recover the teddy, she sees two figures approaching hand in hand, and a siren goes off in her head.

Ambrose and Charlotte together, holding hands, the big pup gambolling at their side.

Time does that weird, arrhythmic thing, slowing down, then jump-starting like a faulty heart. Indie lets out a barrel-chested bark, then another. How Bridget holds it together, she doesn't know, but somehow she manages to pull Indie away from the big, cowering pup. A cockerel crows, and randomly, Bridget thinks of Judas. Then it's over. Ambrose kisses Charlotte, and Charlotte trots into work, beaming the smiles she's stolen from Bridget's quivering lips.

Abandoning Ned and Charlotte to the remainder of the lunch-time rush, Bridget retreats to the bike shed to lock up her dog. Alone, in the dim light of its single bulb, she crouches in the corner pulling air into her lungs in great, heaving gulps. Next to her, on the concrete floor, a stain of chain oil has dried into an odd-shaped blob. Gazing at the blob through tear-filled eyes, Bridget sees the face of a red-nosed clown. The sight of its leering, wide-mouthed grin brings a rush of heat to her cheeks. Hilarious to think she had a chance of dating Ambrose, that fate actually had a plan for her. Twenty full minutes pass before she manages to pull herself up off the floor, fashion a bed for Indie out of an old jumper, then hobble back to the kitchen.

Head down, she refuses to meet Ned's eye as he whizzes in and

out with loaded trays. Bad enough, he got to witness the performance on the lawn; she doesn't want his pity. She simply wants to make it through the rest of the day without drawing further attention to herself. She takes a deep breath, focusing her attention on the carrot she's about to peel. Through the arch, she can hear Charlotte's voice. What Charlotte says to the angry man who didn't get his cup of coffee is of no concern to her. She imagines herself drifting up into the clear blue sky, high above them all, then she hears Ambrose ordering a refill, and she plummets like a fallen grouse.

With trembling hands, she cracks ten eggs into a Tupperware jug, oblivious to the little pieces of shell that sink to the bottom. When the lunchtime scene replays in her mind, she shuts it down by counting the rotations of her whisk. She gets to ten when Van Morrison comes on the radio singing 'Crazy Love.' Was it really so crazy to believe that Ambrose was the one? She pauses mid-whip. Maybe it was a bit crazy, allowing herself to get so carried away, imagining the antique lace wedding dress. Unable to help herself, she lets out a small sob, which she turns into a cough.

When the song finishes, the presenter announces it's three o'clock. Realistically, she tells herself, she could be done by 4.30 if she skips her break. With renewed determination, she measures equal amounts of oil and sugar, then tosses them into the mixer. Next, she adds the eggs, flour, cinnamon, carrots, and coconut. Then, as she's greasing the cake tins, she hears a peal of laughter. Closing her eyes, Bridget sees the blobby clown, doubled over, stamping the ground with his oversized shoe.

She gives herself a small shake, turns the cooker dial, and strikes a match. After several attempts, Ned's ancient oven roars to life. Ten minutes later, she slides in the carrot cakes and begins the clean-up. At 3.45, Ned sidles over to her, 'In future, Bridget,' he says, eyes darting to the ceiling, 'best leave the dog at home.'

'Sure thing,' she says, not bothering to explain that she didn't

bring the dog to work, that Indie, a rescue dog, is prone to straying. Her stomach gives a long, low rumble which Ned affects not to hear. When was the last time she ate? It must have been the piece of toast she had for breakfast. A beat passes before she realises her boss is looking at her expectantly.

'Sorry,' she says. 'What was that?'

'Just checking you're OK to shut up shop. Charlotte's had to dash.'

Bridget nods her head, expressionless. When the timer beeps, she checks the oven. A quick poke with the skewer reveals the carrot cake is still sticky, so she pushes it back in. The worktop is smeared with grease, which she sprays with vinegar. She gives the floor a cursory sweep, clears the counter, and empties the bins. Before she leaves, she turns on the dishwasher, double-checks that she's locked the door, and stops by the shed to retrieve her dog.

By the time she's walked the two-mile trek home, Bridget's feet are as pinched and sore as her heart. Kicking off her sandals, she knocks against a picture hanging on the porch wall. Surrounded by a group of schoolchildren, her great-grand-uncle, Fr. Mossy, looks out from his missionary post in Nigeria. It was Norah Kate who hung the picture. Bridget never knew her great-grand aunt, but the stories have been passed down. She knows that taped to the back of the frame, there's a lock of white blond hair from the baby she bore for Lord Neville. What became of the child, they never found out, but there was talk he'd joined the travelling circus. When she thinks about it, it makes her sad, but as someone once said, the past is a foreign country. There's nothing she, or anyone else, can do to change it.

Later that evening, oblivious to the slow cremation of her own carrot cake, Bridget sits down with her mother to watch the Great British Bake Off. And as she shakes out her long dark hair, the cloth she hung on the oven door begins to smoulder, then a flour

bag catches alight, igniting a pot of plastic spoons and melding them into a blackened mass. By the time the credits roll, the flames have started up a merry dance. One by one, the windows shatter, hitting the ground like crashing cymbals. Then, as the cymbals fade, the big gas bottle explodes with a thunderous roar. Illuminated by a burst of fireworks, the Nevilles bail out of their ancestral home, carrying what few portraits they can retrieve from the dining room walls. From its rooftop perch, the stone dragon watches them with solemn disregard. And somewhere high above the billowing smoke, lips pulled into an obscene grin, the blobby clown turns a perfect somersault.